A crash COURSE IN news WRITING

THE LINK

Concordia's independent newspaper

Writing great news

A news story is an orderly presentation of facts, quotes, and opinions. It is timely and fresh. Its purpose is to supply readers with information of immediate interest.

What should the Link cover?

Some student papers don't cover events occurring outside of the university. Others ignore what happens on campus. Neither approach is correct.

As a university paper we owe it to our readers to inform them about the university and its community. But at the same time, as an alternative to mainstream papers, we should also provide our readers with a student perspective of off-campus events and activities.

The Link should be one step ahead of the mainstream papers. Our goal is to publish information and critical analysis bypassed by the bigger papers. *The Link* is a tool. It serves to help students view their situation within a wider context of social and political issues.

News writing

People often complain that nothing ever happens at Concordia. Wrong. Anyone with initiative and persistence can uncover something worth writing about.

There are several sources for news ideas. The editors will have a list of stories for each issue. You can also check the agenda section of the paper and bulletin boards around campus. If you are interested in a particular beat, find out if there is anything brewing there. Check back issues, clipping files, and the Canadian University Press news exchange for follow-up ideas. Talk to people who are involved around the university. Be aware of what is going on around you.

Writing your news story

A good news story should have at least three sources. Once you've completed your research and interviews, take a few

minutes to look over what you have. Before you type anything, go over your notes and underline all the important quotes and tidbits. It is a good practice to put them down on paper or in the computer and play around. Try reading the ideas in different orders to get a feel for what could eventually be your story's flow.

Select the most important and relevant information. Make it into the first paragraph of your story. That first paragraph is the lead of the story. Statements made in the lead are supported by facts in the following paragraphs. The body of the story elaborates and explains the lead.

Keeping sentences short, write your story from the most important element to the least important. This is called the inverted pyramid style. The idea is to grab the reader's attention right away and entice them to finish the story. Comment pieces, art reviews, opinions and features don't necessarily follow the inverted pyramid style. But every story must have a lead.

Writing leads

A lead can make or break a story. Good leads not only grab the reader's attention, they also give the readers-on-the-go enough information to decide whether or not they want or need to know the rest. A bad lead says nothing or says something in such a garbled or boring manner the readers are turned off.

The lead is concise, crisp and informative. It is one sentence and is usually less than 30 words long. It answers at least one of the W5 + 1 questions.

At a lecture held last Friday in H-110 at 8:45 p.m., Jean Broue, vice-president in charge of marketing for Acme Brewer, told an audience of 150 captivated persons that students at Concordia University are the heaviest drinkers in Canada.

Terrible. The writer is trying to fit too much into the lead and has buried the most important part of the story. Try this instead:

Concordia students are the heaviest drinkers in Canada, consuming five times more beer than students at any other Canadian university, according to Jean Broue, marketing vice-president for Acme Brewers.

Writing style

Your writing style should be direct, concise and lively. Journalists write to make others see and understand events, not to display literary skills. Be correct and accurate but use simple words and structures. Refrain from clichés, they eliminate the need for thought and reflection.

Use of the first person singular (I, me, mine) is forbidden in a news story.

Jargon & numbers

It's easy when talking with an expert to get caught up in the terminology of their field of expertise. People sometimes say things that don't make any sense, but wind up in newspapers anyway. It happens when a journalist is too embarrassed to ask what something means, or just too lazy to check. Regardless of how it happens, it is sloppy, but easy to avoid. Assume that if you don't understand something, readers won't get it either.

On a related note, journalists are not known for their mathematical prowess. Rarely do journalists get it right when dealing with statistics or other numbers. So check. And re-check. Then have someone else check for you.

Can journalists be objective?

Objective: treating or dealing with facts without distortion by personal feelings or prejudices.

Of course not. How can we be? We choose to cover certain events and not others. We also choose who to interview and not to interview. Last but not least, we choose what to highlight and not to highlight in our stories, in our layout and in our comments pages. All these choices are governed by our own opinions and backgrounds. Let's not be hypocrites by pretending to be above all these prejudices. Be honest, be fair.

CHOOSE YOUR WORDS WISELY

The Link strives to print progressive material, and it's important to realize that the words you choose for your stories are as important as the subjects you discuss.

The careful choice of words should not be mistaken as political correctness or dismissed as semantics. The words you use make a difference. Just as we aim to raise people's consciousness with the stories we do, we have a responsibility to do the same thing with the language we use as writers and editors. It's easy to think we're doing a good enough job by including stories in the paper that most other papers wouldn't even write. But part of writing progressive material is using language that is inclusive and sensitive.

IT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WRITING

"Twelve of Concordia's handicapped were invited to speak to the Rector last week about accessibility on campus."

and

"Twelve Concordia students with disabilities were invited to speak to the Rector last week about accessibility on campus."

or

"Sparklers is a group for Concordia's elderly."

and

"Sparklers is a group of Concordia students who are seniors."

The idea is to put people first, and not to identify people by their differences. Many journalists de-humanize people they are writing about by writing "the disabled" or "the elderly" instead of "people with disabilities," "older adults" or "seniors."

Think about the connotations of referring to a sexual abuse victim versus a survivor of sexual abuse. Such language serves to further marginalize already marginalized people and reduces the value of the coverage of often-ignored groups. Words should empower instead of victimize people.

The Link is Concordia's independent newspaper. It was founded in 1980 upon the merger of *the Georgian* of Sir George Williams University, and *Loyola News* of Loyola College. We are always looking for writers, editors, photographers, artists, designers and all sorts of creative thinkers to contribute to the paper. If you'd like to get involved, drop by the office or give us a call, and we'll put you to work. Most of Canada's best journalists got their start at student papers. Why not you?

Staff meetings every Friday at 4 p.m. at *the Link* office, room 649 in Concordia's Hall Building. Everyone is welcome.

1455 de Maisonneuve W., Suite H-649
Montreal, QC H3G 1M8
phone (514) 848-7405
fax (514) 848-4540

e-mail: linkconc@total.net

Thanks to Concordia's New Student Program for making this project possible.